

## Franconia Notch Parking Research Review



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The growing popularity of the White Mountains has meant the number of visitors to Franconia Notch State Park has outpaced the availability of parking, resulting in overflow vehicles parking on the shoulders of the interstate highway. New Hampshire is looking for solutions and has sought public input in part via an online survey. As a first step to understanding the problem, possible solutions, and barriers to them, the data captured from this survey were reviewed.

A total of 1,256 responses were obtained between early October and early November of this year. And while this survey methodology will result in a potentially biased sample, and whether the questionnaire employed was properly focused on the most important issues, a review of these results provides at the very least meaningful input to help direct next steps in developing a solution.

### **Respondent Profile**

Generally speaking and not surprisingly, those completing the survey are fairly avid users of Franconia Notch State Park. When asked their frequency of park use, approximately 10% visit no more than once a year, while another 10% come at least once a month. Among the remainder, they average about 4 visits a year, making them all generally familiar with the area and no doubt the problems to be encountered.

Besides being generally frequent and familiar visitors, they are likely fairly avid and serious hikers. This is reflected in part in their behavior, but may also be reflected in their visit to the site where the survey was housed. These folks who come in parties of two or more usually arrive early – almost none any later than 9 a.m. – and hike for most of the day, typically finishing no earlier than mid-afternoon or later.

The importance of this profile is that it represents people who know what to expect and have learned to deal with it. For some, their early arrival is dictated by an interest in beating the crowds and finding parking. But these are independent adventurers, and they have no problem parking on the highway or in the woods for that matter. It is almost as if it is their right. They recognize that there is insufficient parking but make do with what they can. Importantly, from a qualitative standpoint, this suggests that the first-timers or less experienced could easily be deterred.

### **Priorities**

The core of the survey, which was designed to provide input into the parking issue, was a series of six statements that respondents were to rank regarding what they would do when faced with non-parking availability where they had planned.

The table below summarizes these results. It's fairly clear the majority would change their planned hike – either its destination or trail – when encountering this problem. What is interesting is that there is a disinclination to be any more flexible than that. Most clearly, respondents aren't going to abandon their hiking plans or their visit to the park. And they really aren't particularly interested in changing their parking behavior.

	% Ranked #1	Mean Ranking
Make plans to hike to a different destination?	33%	2.2
Make plans to hike an alternate trail to reach your hiking destination?	25%	2.5
Use a shuttle system to get a ride to this trailhead from a parking area elsewhere?	14%	3.6
Park in another location? (please describe)	12%	3.4
Seek an alternate activity outside of the Franconia Notch area? (please describe)	6%	4.6
Seek an alternate activity in the Franconia Notch area? (please describe)	3%	4.7

In reviewing the qualitative comments, it becomes clear that these serious hikers who are familiar with the area make plans ahead of time that they are not likely to abandon. In fact, they are more likely to abandon their cars than abandon their plan.

*"Wherever possible. Once driving that far, I am not leaving just because someone else got there first."*

*"Park on interstate like others and as I have done before. This is not safe but nowhere else to park."*

*"On the shoulders. Parking is already not permitted. I will continue even though I don't want to."*

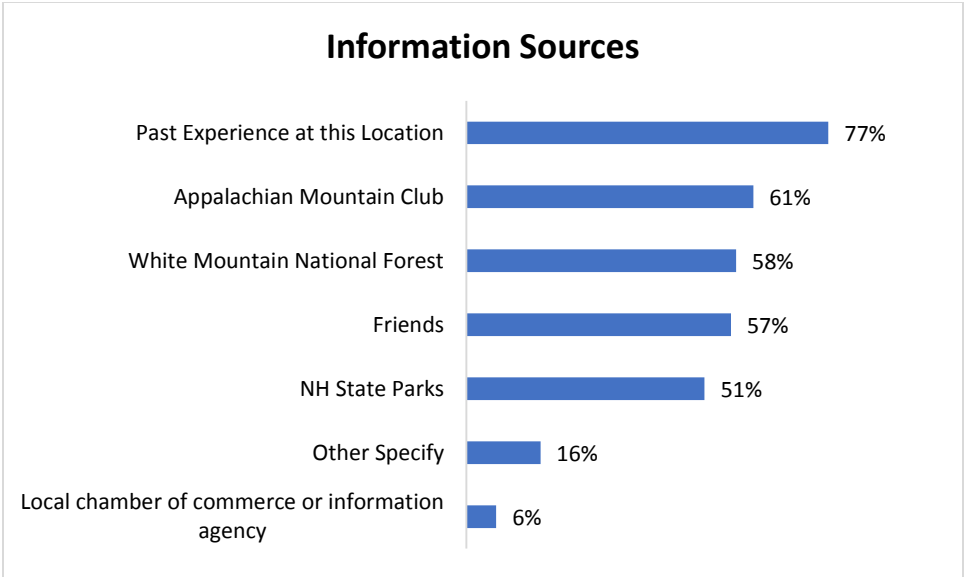
*"Off interstate until parking has been established. Sorry. That's just what I'd do."*

*"It takes a lot to plan out some hikes. We wouldn't want to change that just because of parking."*

This is not to say that there was not a positive response to a parking solution. There were many, many respondents who currently seek other options like Canon. The challenge is that they are already doing so. The folks who are parking on the interstate have made their hiking plans and think it's their right and privilege to park there. They want parking where they want it. Provided that it is really close, and doesn't add much distance to the hike, or was a free shuttle, it could succeed. But the spirit of these results suggests that those who want to be near the trailhead will park there regardless – so more parking is needed where they want to park.

### Information sources

The best outlet to reach these hikers is undoubtedly the ones they currently use. These are illustrated in the table below:



**Additional Research**

While this research is limited in scope, the critical issue to address is what additional information is needed to help guide the solution to the parking problem. However, the limit of this research is that it is focused on the familiar heavy users and not more casual visitation. Unfortunately, that latter may already be likely users of alternative sites and are probably not the problem. Rather, the heavy users are the likely highway parkers and they will continue without a free, close option.

